

Behind *Heathendom*: Archaeological Studies of Old Norse Religion

ANDERS ANDRÉN*

SUMMARY

This paper offers a synthesis of a large body of recent research into the Old Norse religion which has been conducted as part of the multidisciplinary research project Väger till Midgård – Roads to Midgard. Evidence for the Pre-Christian Norse religion is drawn from Medieval Icelandic literature, place-names and the archaeology of ritual sites. The movement from remote, open-air temples (vé) to purpose built ritual houses and finally churches is outlined and the development of a pre-Christian priesthood is explored. Burial archaeology from the Bronze Age to the Christian era provides a vital perspective on changing religious concepts. The prolonged contact with the Mediterranean world during the Roman Iron Age exerted a strong influence on old Norse religion and some of the most distinctively Scandinavian religious features can be seen to be hybrid cultural constructs.

KEYWORDS: Scandinavia, *Väger till Midgård*, paganism, Christianity, ritual, burial.

INTRODUCTION

‘Ravages of heathen man miserably destroyed God’s church on Lindisfarne with plunder and slaughter.’ This famous short notice for the year 793 in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle is one of the first to observe the ravages of the Norsemen in the British Isles. The attacks continued for more than 200 years and the ravaging men, whom we have called Vikings since the 19th century, are often described as ruthless and furious, raping, killing and burning much in their way. The descriptions varied, but the annals repeatedly stress that the men from the North were pagans. The non-Christian background of the Norsemen was regarded as especially terrifying, in connection with the plundering of churches and monasteries, such as Lindisfarne in 793 (Graham-Campbell and Kidd 1980: 25 ff.).

Although the Northmen were described as pagans, the sources say very little about what their pagan background really meant. Despite this, the pagan Scandinavian religion is perceived today as one of the best-known non-Christian religions in Europe, comparable with, say, Roman or Greek religion. The reason is the rich and highly varied Icelandic literature, which makes it possible to gaze into an alien mythological world with gods, heroes, and other non-human powers.

*Department of Archaeology and Classical Studies, Stockholm University, SE-106 91, Stockholm

Of particular significance is the Icelandic chieftain and poet Snorri Sturluson (1178–1241), who wrote the first systematic survey of Old Norse mythology in a handbook for skalds, known as the *Prose Edda* (Simek 1993; Lindow 2001).

It is fully possible to make an archaeological study of pre-Christian religion in Scandinavia without any consideration of the Icelandic literature. However, such a study would lose fundamental references to a partly non-Christian interpretative framework. Besides, the Icelandic texts exist irrespective of whether one use them or not, and they will always give a pre-understanding of this particular field of research. Therefore, my position is that a dialogue between archaeology and the Old Norse texts should be maintained (cf. Andrén 1998a), even though the use of Snorri's texts, or other Icelandic poems or sagas, in studies of Old Norse religion leads automatically to a number of problems which have been discussed ever since the 18th century.

The Icelandic texts are medieval Christian literature, showing how authors in 13th-century Iceland interpreted the pre-Christian history of Iceland and Scandinavia. A basic question is therefore how we should view the relationship between the fiction of the narratives, the author's society in the 13th century, and the pre-Christian society in which most of the narratives are placed. Do they merely present an imagined heathen religion or do the Icelandic stories contain elements based on a historical reality (Olsen 1966; Krag 1991; Meulengracht Sørensen 1993; Clunies Ross 1994, 1998)? Another problem concerns the character of pre-Christian Norse religion, since contemporary sources called it *forn siðr*, that is, 'the old custom' or 'the old way of life'. In other words, people in those days emphasised the religious practice, but in the Iceland literature there is very little information about rituals. We are given a detailed description of the pantheon, but – paradoxically – very little knowledge about how people related to these powers (Clunies Ross 2002).

For a long time the solution to these problems of source criticism has been to compare the Icelandic texts with other evidence. This includes descriptions of Scandinavians in Roman, German, and Arab sources, and linguistic evidence from place-names, runic inscriptions, and the etymology of various words. These strategies show that many details in the Icelandic texts are not pure invention; they must have had some relation to a pre-Christian past (de Vries 1970). At the same time, the comparative methods involve other problems. The chronologically and geographically scattered statements about the Norsemen and their customs can too easily be combined into a homogenised picture of their religious traditions. Moreover, the approach of historical linguistics means that linguistic proximity is emphasised at the expense of geographical proximity. Various Indo-European languages are used as self-evident points of reference in studies of pre-Christian Norse religion, regardless of the geographical habitat of the languages (de Vries 1970; Dumézil 1973). Nearby Sámi and Finnish areas, on the other hand, are often – but not always – ignored, despite extensive cultural encounters with these regions (cf. DuBois 1999; Price 2002; Bertell 2003).

Another strategy for solving the Icelandic challenge has long been (e.g. Petersen 1876) to investigate material culture from pre-Christian times in Scandinavia. Pictures, figures, and traces of rituals have been used in various ways to study pre-Christian Norse religion. Yet because the Icelandic texts

have remained the actual starting point for these studies, the objects themselves have often played a passive role. They have been used as illustrations and confirmations, but have rarely been granted a more active role in analyses of the pre-Christian religion of Scandinavia (cf. Andrén 1998a).

The problems with the Icelandic texts have thus attracted attention for a long time, but for the past few decades there have been new conditions for tackling the Icelandic dilemma. The reason is that the perspectives on religion have been renewed in the field of history of religion, while simultaneously the view of material culture has changed in archaeology.

Religion is no longer perceived as theology, but is viewed much more as changing practice. As a consequence of the new perspectives, ritual is not necessarily regarded as a representation of myths, but can be apprehended as a formalised act that in itself creates meaning (Bell 1992; Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994). In the same way, the outlook on material culture has changed in archaeology, with the coming of contextual perspectives. Material culture used to be perceived primarily as passive traces of technical, economic, and social circumstances, while religious traditions were more of a residual category for things that could not be explained (Hawkes 1954). For the past two decades or so, objects have instead been viewed as active elements in constant negotiations and renegotiations between people. Meanings can be ascribed to artefacts, which can sometimes represent complex ideas. As in many other human sciences, interpretation has been placed centre-stage in archaeology (e.g. Hodder 1986, 2001). The new perspectives mean that the disciplines of history of religion and archaeology can meet in a new and fruitful way. Moreover, the new interest in ideology, mentality, and religion in archaeology means that totally new source material for pre-Christian Norse religion has been added in recent years (e.g. Engdahl and Kaliff 1996). For example, it is possible for the first time to have a serious discussion of the occurrence of ritual buildings in pre-Christian Scandinavia on the basis of concrete physical evidence from the Iron Age.

The changed conditions for studying pre-Christian Norse religion are the background to an interdisciplinary project at Lund University, *Roads to Midgard – Norse Paganism in Long-term Perspectives*, which I have directed along with Kristina Jennbert and Catharina Raudvere since 2000. The project, whose main financier is the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation, consists of fifteen participants from archaeology, historical archaeology, and history of religion. Alongside its own work the project has organised four Nordic symposia (Raudvere *et al.* 2001; Jennbert *et al.* 2002; Andrén *et al.* 2004; Berggren *et al.* 2004), a series of guest lectures open to the public (Raudvere *et al.* 2005), and an international conference (Andrén *et al.* 2006); the project has also taken part in the production of a large exhibition at the Henry Dunker Culture Centre in Helsingborg (Andrén and Carelli 2006). It is not possible in this context to sum up the project as a whole or its parts (Raudvere 2003; Habbe 2005). Generally speaking, however, I would stress that the project has not concerned itself with mythology in the conventional sense. This does not mean that we have devalued the role of narratives in religious tradition; instead our ambition is to renew the study of Norse religion, which has for so long put the myths in the centre. This means that we have chiefly focused our studies on rituals and more general ideas

such as cosmology. In the following I will briefly sum up some of the project's perspectives on these matters.

1. TRACING RITUAL PRACTICE

Medieval Icelandic literature is mostly about worldly matters, but the texts that deal in one way or another with pre-Christian Norse religion consist mainly of narratives with a mythological content. In the Eddas and in the sagas we can read about gods and other powers, about the view of the world and about bygone heroes. On the other hand, there is surprisingly little about how people acted in relation to the divine powers. There are occasional records of sacrifices and other rituals, but the descriptions were written down long after the conversion to Christianity, and their credibility is disputed (Olsen 1966; Düwel 1985), as previously stated. The lack of information about rituals is odd, since Old Norse religion was described by contemporaries as *forn siðr* or 'the old way of life'. Although people's actions were emphasised in connection with pre-Christian religion, the Icelandic literature gives us very few details about rituals and behaviour towards the gods.

To get a glimpse of 'the old way of life' one must turn chiefly to place-names, the material traces of rituals, and Arab and German sources from the time before or during Christianisation. These sources present many different 'ways of living' and actions related to the powers. Some rituals were aimed at individual gods and goddesses, some actions were intended more to ensure good fortune, while other rituals seem to have been chiefly performed for their social significance. People's identity was changed through various initiation rites and passage rites, but it is uncertain whether these rituals were also connected to superhuman powers. The 'old way of life' thus consisted of a number of different and changing traditions, comprising much more than what we today would call religion. Even if people imagined a world of gods, and also addressed it, their religious expressions were often more interwoven in the contemporary daily life.

Between humans and powers

The many sacral place-names from the late Iron Age show that rituals could be clearly directed towards certain powers. The place-names reveal sites where the cult of the most important gods and the goddesses was performed, for example Torsvi (Thor's sacred place) and Närlunda (Njörd's sacrificial grove). The rituals were primarily connected to some of the divinities in the two families of gods: the Æsir (Odin, Thor, Tyr and Ull) and the Vanir (Njörd, Freyr and Freyja). The second element of the place-names shows that the rites could be performed at many different places in the landscape. Rituals could take place in houses and on farms, but also in arable fields and pastures, in groves, at trees, stones, and rocks, in streams, rivers, and lakes, and in bogs and fens (Vikstrand 2001). Certain place-names show that some places were perceived as demarcated sacred sites, while other place-names suggest that rites were performed in everyday contexts.

What people did in these places with sacral names is often uncertain, but various activities can be glimpsed through archaeological excavations. It has been

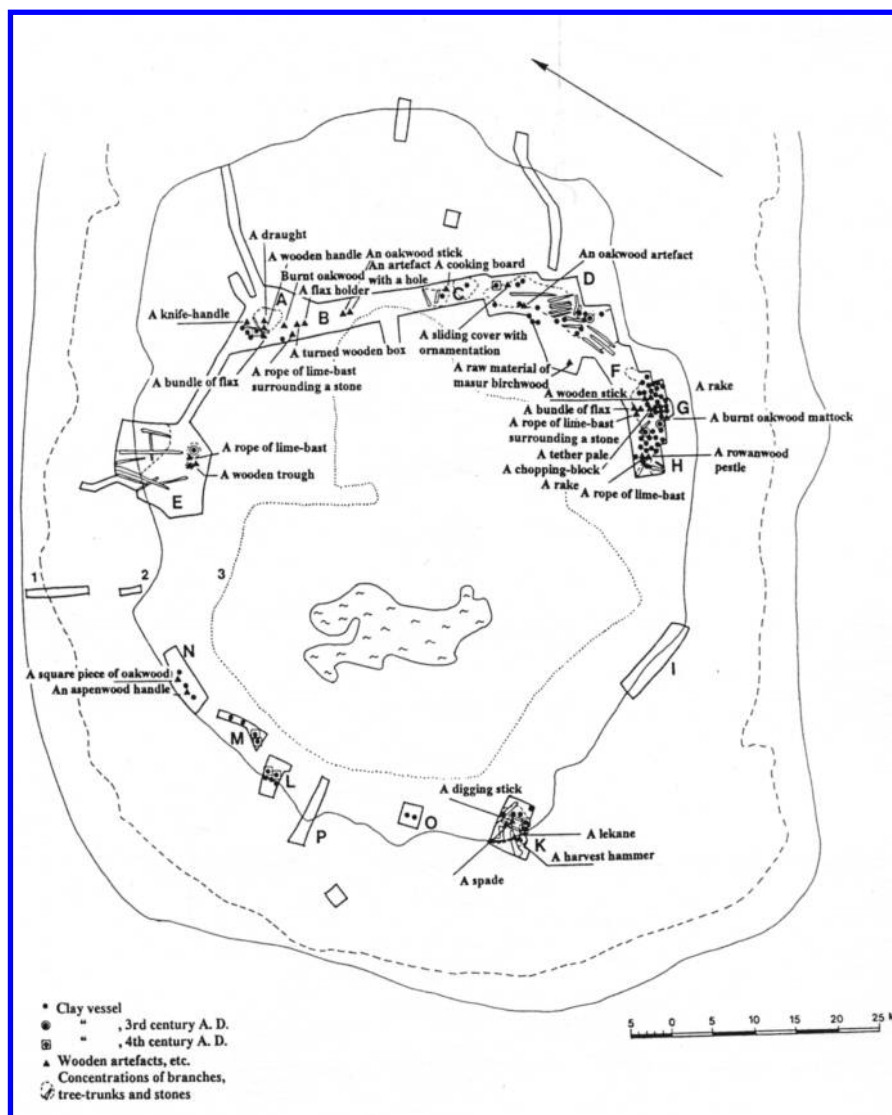


Fig 1 Plan of the small lake Käringsjön in southern Halland, Sweden, and ritual deposits excavated in 1941. The deposited objects are dated to the 3rd and 4th centuries AD (after Carlie 1998, Fig 4).

known for a long time that wetlands and lakes contain ritual deposits from many periods of prehistory. An example is the lake Käringsjön in southern Halland (Carlie 1998). In this little round lake, 50 metres in diameter, traces of rituals from the 3rd and 4th centuries AD have been investigated (Fig 1). On the edge of the shore there were wooden platforms, beside which pots containing food and drink were deposited, and offerings such as bunches of flax, stones wrapped in bast rope, and various wooden tools such as a spade, two rakes, a flail, a trough, and a tether

stake. The little lake has been interpreted as a site for seasonal rituals performed by a local farming population. In view of the name of the lake, 'Hag Lake', and the nearby place-name Älvasjö, ('Elf Lake'), the rituals may have been performed by women only, and addressed to fertility divinities such as *disir* and female elves.

A completely different example of rites connected with water comes from Skedemosse on Öland (Hagberg 1967a–b). Huge quantities of animals, humans, weapons, and gold objects were thrown into this large shallow lake over a very long time, from the 5th century BC until the 10th century AD. Remains of a total of 38 young and old people of both sexes have been found, along with 100 horses, 80 cattle, 60 sheep and goats, 15 pigs, and seven dogs. On several occasions during the period AD 200–500, several thousand destroyed weapons and seven gold rings were also deposited in the lake. These weapon deposits have many contemporary parallels in southern Scandinavia (see below). The finds from the now-drained lake allow us to glimpse huge, spectacular cultic feasts which must at times have assembled a large share of the island's population. The rites comprised the deposition of human bodies, the slaughter of horses and domesticated livestock, and the display and destruction of weapons taken as booty from defeated armies. The name of the place may refer to horse races and stallion baiting, further underlining the significance of horses and their slaughter.

Less is known about rituals on dry land, probably because they are more difficult to trace, but several sites have been discovered in the last few decades. Rituals connected with groves can be illustrated by Lunda (meaning 'grove') near Strängnäs in Södermanland (Andersson 2006). About a hundred metres south-west of a farm and a cemetery from the Iron Age, a little moraine hill has been excavated, with vestiges of activities from the 2nd century BC until the 10th century AD. People built irregular stone settings on the hill, laid carpets of small angular stones, started fires, split large stone blocks, scattered burnt bones of sheep, goats, and pigs, and threw out lumps of burnt clay and pieces of resin. During the 7th, 8th and 9th centuries there were also deposits of unburnt beads, knives and arrowheads at this site. It seems to have been a matter of locally based rituals primarily expressed in the form of slaughter and burning of livestock. The site no doubt corresponds to the votive grove that has given Lunda its name, so it is envisaged that the activities on the hill took place in the shade of large trees, probably marked out by the irregular stone settings that were found on the site.

Even a lone tree could be the focus of rituals, as is shown by a find from Frösö church in Jämtland (Hildebrandt 1989). People there in the 9th and 10th centuries deposited parts of animals around a large birch, which originally stood in the middle of a burial ground surrounded by mounds. At the foot of the birch were bones of bear, elk, and red deer, but also pigs, sheep/goats, and cattle. The birch can be interpreted as a special sacrificial tree, representing the world-tree at the centre of the world. The place-name shows that the tree and the rituals around it were chiefly associated with the god Freyr.

Ritual deposits were often relatively well demarcated through natural boundaries, as at lakes, bogs, or hills. But there are also sacral place-names indicating that a particularly holy site could be marked off by ropes (*vébönd*) and known as a *vé* or 'sanctuary'. At Ullevi near Linköping in Östergötland, one such site from the period 400 BC–400 AD has been excavated (Nielsen 2005). Near the Iron Age

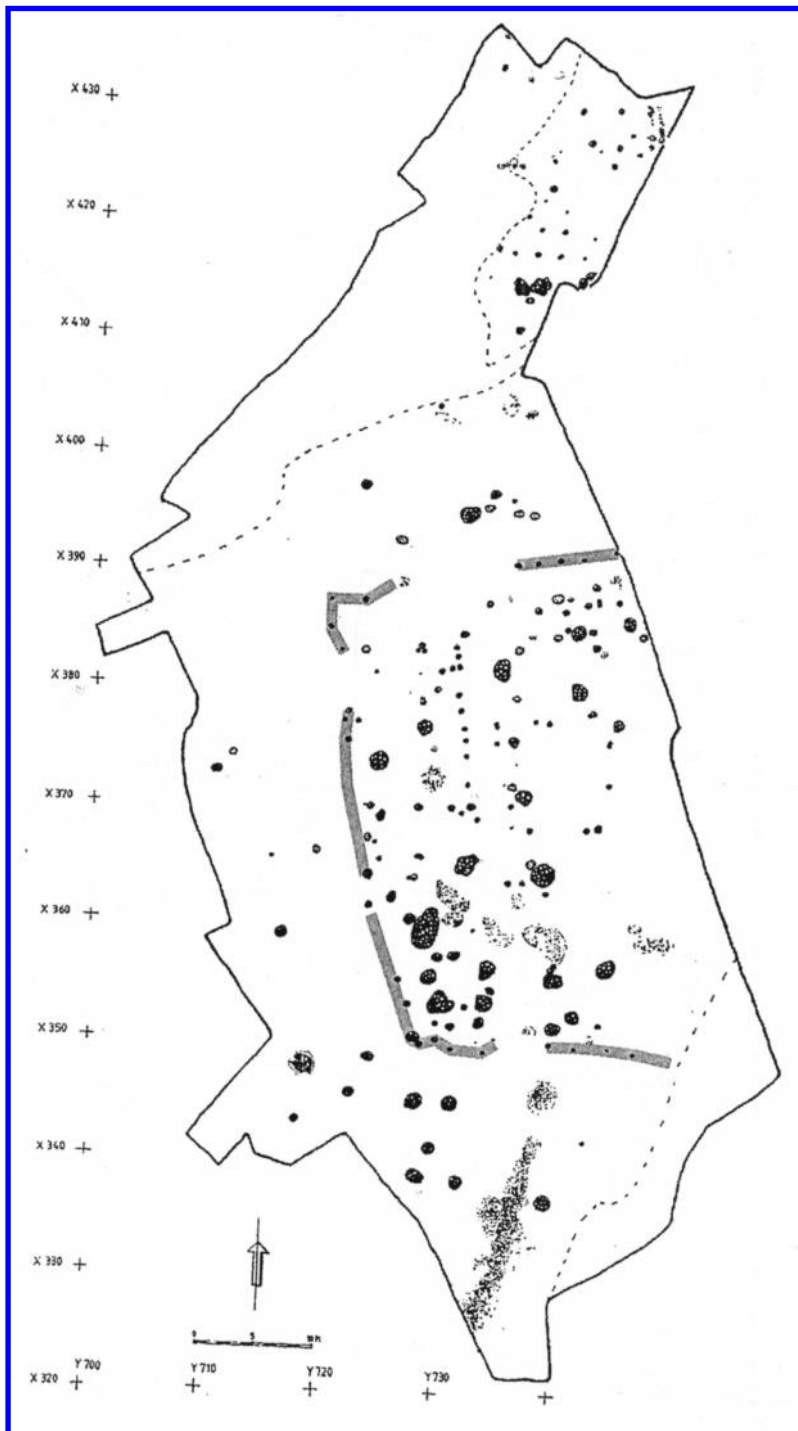


Fig 2 Plan of a vé? An irregular rectangular fenced area with some 40 hearths and cooking pits, and a paved road leading from the south to an opening in the fenced area. The site, which is dated to 400 BC–400 AD, is situated immediately south of the historic village of Ullevi in Östergötland, Sweden (after Nielsen 2005, Fig 10).

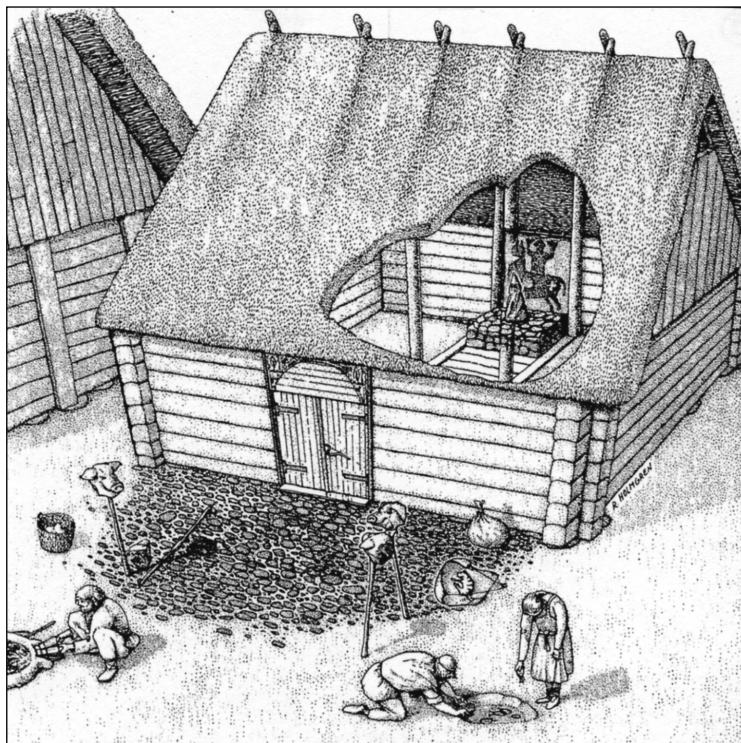


Fig 3 A reconstruction of a ritual house at Borg in Östergötland, Sweden. The building and the deposits in front of it have been dated to the 9th and 10th centuries AD (after Nielsen 1997, Fig 5).

settlement was an irregular rectangular area demarcated with posts (Fig 2). A special paved road connected the settlement with the demarcated area, and within the enclosure about forty hearths and cooking pits have been found, with burnt and unburnt bones from domesticated animals. The demarcated area and the name of the place show that this was a local ‘sanctuary’ to the god Ull, where people slaughtered livestock and prepared food.

From the 3rd, 4th, 5th and 6th centuries we find the first traces of special cult houses in Scandinavia. The cult houses and the areas around them seem to have been given place-names with elements such as *hörgr* ‘cairn or stone altar’, *-hof* ‘temple’, or *-salr* ‘hall’. On several large estates, small cult buildings have been found close to the main dwellings. One example is Borg near Norrköping in Östergötland (Nielsen 1997). In the 8th century a small log building was erected on this site with a low platform of stone slabs at one end of the house (Fig 3). In front of the building was a large area paved with fire-cracked stones, and at the end of this paving a bare rock. The paved yard contained traces of iron forging, and along the bare rock about a hundred amulets in the shape of firesteels were buried. Between the fire-cracked stones there were huge quantities of bones from horses and livestock, and also occasional bones from wild animals such as red deer, elk, fox, and probably wolf. Of domesticated animals, it was above all pigs that were

slaughtered and eaten on the site. Bones of boars and sows were deposited in different areas, which shows that the sex of the pig was important in this ritualised slaughter. The traces at Borg can be perceived as rituals connected to a major farm, and it is very possible that one or more images of gods stood on the stone slabs in the little log building.

Rituals also took place in the main buildings on the big farms, which are called halls (*hallir*, *salir*) in the later medieval literature (Callmer and Rosengren 1997; Jørgensen 2002). In several halls *guldgubbar*, or small gold foils with stamped images of men, women, or couples, have been found along the walls and at roof-bearing posts. The meaning and function of these gold-foil figures is debated, but they show that formalised rituals, perhaps of a judicial character, took place in the halls (Watt 2004; Ratke and Simek 2006). An example of a hall with ritual functions is the famous 'temple' at Old Uppsala in central Sweden (Hultgård 1997; Janson 1998). The German historian Adam of Bremen wrote at the end of the 11th century that images of Odin, Thor, and Freyr stood in the middle of the temple, and that offerings were made to the images in connection with disease, famine, war, and marriage. Adam's description is highly disputed, but traces on the site actually support his account. 'The temple' can probably be identified with a hall about 60 metres long (Fig 4), which was placed on a huge Viking Age terrace in the present-day churchyard at Old Uppsala (Andrén 2002; Alkarp 2005). According to Adam of Bremen, every ninth year there were also large cultic feasts at Uppsala, when humans, horses, and livestock were sacrificed and hung up in a sacred grove. No traces of these rites have been found, but the information is not implausible since it closely resembles the finds from Skedemosse on Öland.

The different sites presented here give some hint of the ritual diversity in the pre-Christian religious tradition. The rites could be performed at many distinct places, differing not only from one district to another but also varying between different social contexts. Some were limited local rites while others were large central cult feasts. Many of the rites no doubt included elements unknown to us, such as dancing, singing, or formal speeches, but all that remains today are some material traces. Although the material remains represent a mere fraction of the rites once performed, there are great differences between the sites when it comes to the deposited artefacts, humans, and animals. The only common denominator is that all these settings contained slaughtered livestock. This also agrees well with the scanty Icelandic statements about sacrifices in Old Norse religion. The etymology of the different words denoting cult or sacrifice reveals associations with slaughter of animals, painting red with blood, boiling meat, and drinking (Green 1998).

Transformations

The 'old way of life' comprised much more than rituals at demarcated cult sites. People's everyday lives were ritualised in a way that we only partly recognise. These rites were in large measure a matter of transforming people and things. The rituals were primarily part of the actual transformation, although they could sometimes also refer to the divine powers and the conceptual world. Through a great many ritualised acts, people changed identity, for example, from newborn to

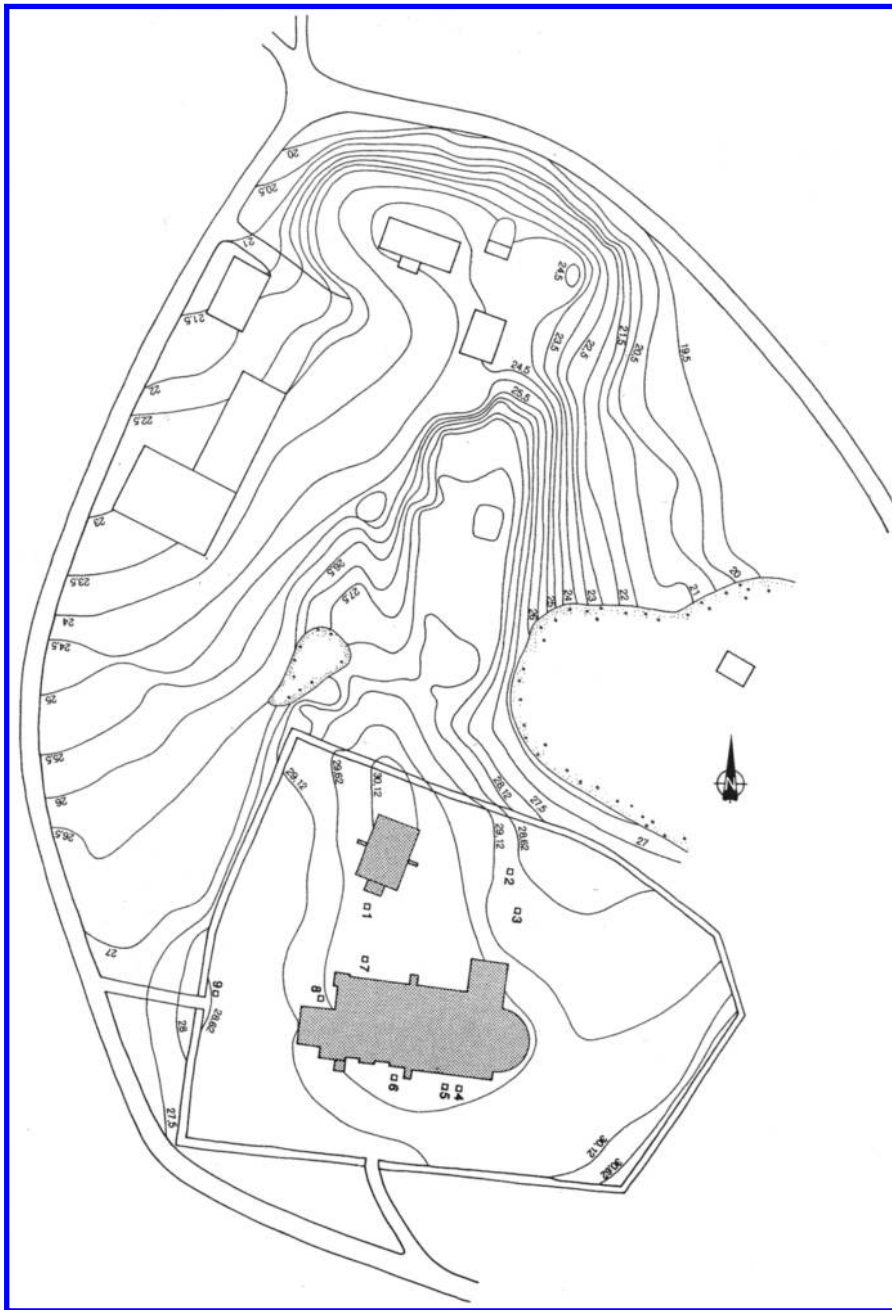


Fig 4 Plan of the remains of the medieval church at Old Uppsala and its nearest surroundings (after Nordahl 1996, Fig 6). The contours clearly show two large house terraces north of the church. On the terrace immediately north of the churchyard a large hall from the 7th century has been excavated. The isarithms also indicate a third terrace, about 60 metres long, within the churchyard, reaching from the church to the bell tower and the fence of the churchyard north of the church. This terrace can be connected with house remains from the 10th and 11th centuries found inside the church. The terrace probably represents a large Viking Age hall that Adam of Bremen described as a 'temple'.

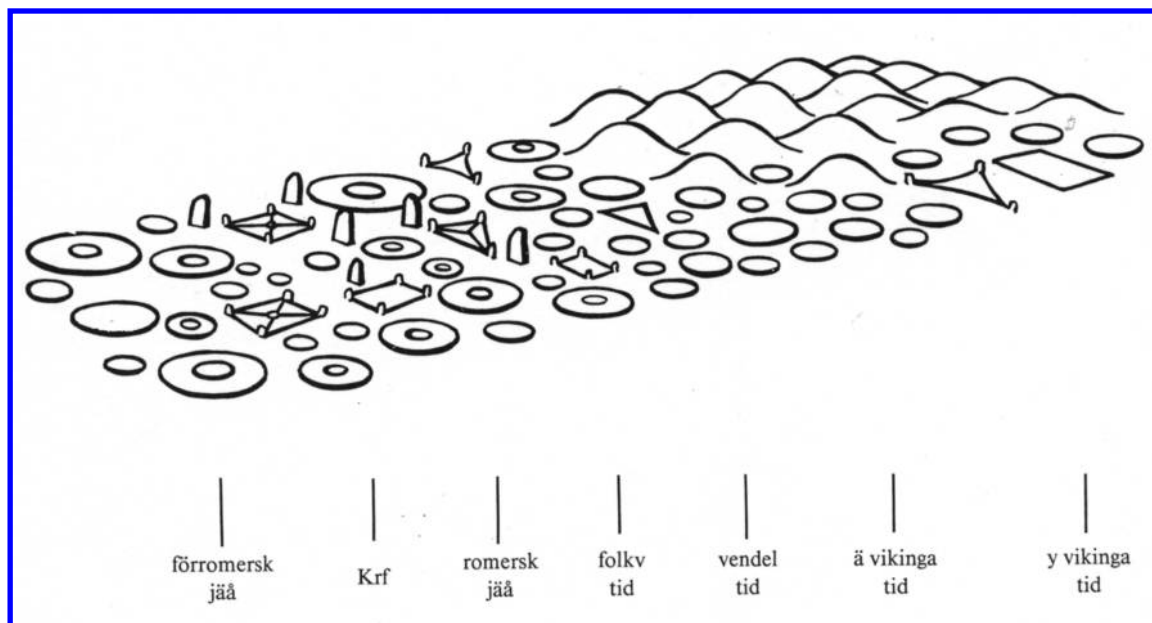


Fig 5 Schematic overview of external markers of graves in the Mälaren valley, central Sweden. The variation is in this case partly chronological, from left to right, Pre-Roman Iron Age (500–501 BC) to Viking Age (800–1050 AD) (after Bennett 1987, Fig 9).

human being, from unmarried to married, from slave to freeman, or from living to dead. In the Icelandic literature there are hints of rites of initiation and passage, which took place both indoors and outdoors.

The clearest traces of passage rites, however, are the pre-Christian burial rituals, when the dead passed from the world of the living to that of the dead (Bennett 1987; Näsman 1994; Artelius 2000; Svanberg 2003; Artelius and Svanberg 2005). There were significant variations in mortuary practice. The dead could be inhumed in pits, wooden coffins, wooden chambers, boats, or stone cists. The dead could also be cremated, and the burnt bones could be left lying at the site of the pyre, or buried in pits or placed in pots or kegs. Occasional very richly furnished graves were filled with objects, pots of food and drink, and sacrificed animals, while others contained only remains of the dead person's dress, and many had no finds other than the bones of the deceased. The graves could be invisible, with no external markers, or clearly manifested through burial mounds, stone settings, or standing stones in various geometrical figures (Fig 5). Most people were buried in burial grounds, but solitary graves are also known. The principles for burial in cemeteries varied through time and place. Sometimes households were buried together, at other times men and women were buried separately, and in certain cases children were buried in special areas. Graves with infants have also been found under the floors in dwelling houses.

Presumably not all people who died were buried in a manner that can be traced, so we may expect that certain corpses were handled in ways that are totally alien to us today. Perhaps some dead people were just left to lie in forests or

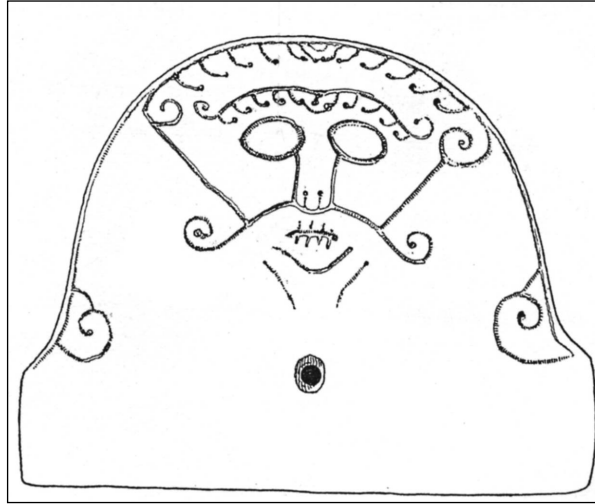


Fig 6 Forge-stone of Norwegian steatite dated to the Viking Age, found at Snaftun in eastern Jutland, Denmark. The forge-stone is decorated with a human face where the mouth is sewed up. Due to parallels in Snorri's *Edda* the image is interpreted as the god Loki (after Glob 1959, Fig 3, cf. Burström 1990).

outlands. Even those who were cremated were handled in very different ways. Normally less than half of the burnt bones from a person are found when we excavate cremation graves (Petré 1984: 204 ff.). The dead who were cremated must therefore have been involved in rites which we cannot detect. Perhaps parts of the burnt bones and remains of the funeral pyre were scattered over the landscape, so that the dead people literally became part of the farm's or the village's lands.

The many modes of ritual treatment and placing of the dead had their counterparts in the mental world, where there was a wide variety of ideas about the abodes of the dead (Simek 1993). These realms were not good or evil in the same way as the heaven and hell of Christianity. The crucial thing for the abode of the dead was not the dead person's life evaluated as a whole but rather the manner of the death. Warriors who fell in battle were believed to end up with Odin in Valhalla or with Freyja at Folkvang. Those who drowned lived with the sea goddess Ran, while many who died of disease went to Hel, the name of the goddess of death and of her abode of the dead in the underworld. There are also vague hints of other realms of the dead, known as *Glæsisvellir* ('the shining fields'), *Óðáinsakr* ('the fields of the undead'), and *Ymisland* (the land of Ymir the primeval giant). Some dead people were believed to go on living in sacred mountains or in the actual grave, while others haunted the living as ghosts. Some were moreover believed to be reborn as new people. The mythological diversity was thus at least as great as the differences in burial rites.

Yet rites were not just associated with people's changed identity; they also concerned the transformation of objects. The metamorphosis of bog ore to iron, of iron to steel, or of steel to sharp weapons was not just regarded as technology

(Gansum 2004). The refinement of iron has in many cultures been perceived as a kind of change of the already created world, and so the craftsmen also had to master rituals and attitudes which controlled the powers of the world (Barndon 2005). These anthropological analogies can explain, in Scandinavian contexts, why iron slag was deposited in graves, why specialised smithwork often appears at cult sites, and why a blast nozzle can have mythological motifs (Fig 6; Burström 1990; Nielsen 1997; Glob 1959).

The ritualisation is most obvious in connection with iron production, but it probably also occurred in connection with bronze casting, goldsmithing, weaving, and leather crafts. Remains of bronze casting were sometimes 'buried' in special pits, goldsmithing occurred in ritual contexts (Larsson 2004), weaving was clearly associated with the divinities of fate, and leather remains from shoe manufacture had mythological meanings with consequences for the way they were handled. Snorri Sturluson records that cut-off strips of leather from shoe manufacture had to be thrown away to help the god Vidar to have a thick sole in preparation for avenging the death of Odin at Ragnarök. Vidar faced the Midgard Serpent in the final battle and managed to slay the monster by putting one foot with a thick-soled shoe in its lower jaw (Simek 1993).

Other ritualised transformations can be connected with houses and their chequered history (Carlie 2004; Falk 2006). In thresholds, post-holes, wall trenches, or under floors, different types of artefacts were deposited when a new house was built or an old one was demolished. The oldest deposits are known from the Early Neolithic, around 4500 BC, while the latest come from the 20th century AD. During this long period both the choice of objects and the meaning of the rituals changed. It was primarily ceramic vessels, millstones, pointed tools or weapons, and animal skulls that were deposited in houses during the Iron Age. The objects that can be linked to the actual construction of the houses should primarily be viewed as different ways of reinforcing or preserving the 'luck' of the house. The rites probably had very little to do with the world of the Old Norse gods, as is suggested by the long continuity of these 'building deposits'.

Through these examples of 'transformation rituals' we glimpse a multifaceted world which in many ways is alien to us. Rites occurred in everyday life and in connection with technology, and they were compulsory and necessary parts of this life-world. Rituals, then, cannot be viewed merely as an extra ornament for the act of real importance. An example of how essential rituals could still be during the Middle Ages comes from the provincial laws of Scandinavia. If a slave was freed by mistake through a manumission ceremony at the thing, the judicial problem concerned who had deceived the assembly of the people and therefore had to be condemned. The freedom of the slave, on the other hand, could not be disputed, since the ritual literally made him or her free (Mazo Karras 1988).

People with knowledge

Very little is known about the people who carried the traditions of 'the old way of life'. But there does not seem to have been any professional priesthood in the pre-Christian Norse religion. Instead we glimpse cult leaders and religious specialists of both sexes, through runic inscriptions, personal names, place-names, and

accounts in Icelandic, German, and Arab sources. In all these cases the references are to people with special experience and knowledge or with special relations to the powers (Green 1998; Sundqvist 1998).

Rulers such as kings, earls, and chieftains presided over cults at major feasts. In both Icelandic and German sources there are details of how the rulers were responsible for large sacrificial feasts (*blót*) and also took part in the actual rituals (Sundqvist 2002). The chieftains' ritual functions can be traced as far back as the 7th century thanks to a rune-stone from Stentoften in Blekinge. The inscription begins by stating that 'with nine bucks, with nine stallions, Hathuwulf gave good growth' (Santesson 1989). But apart from the rulers there were numerous names and concepts which emphasised different ritual specialists. The meaning of the concepts no doubt varied through time and place; moreover, they seem to have referred to partly overlapping functions.

The relation to the world of the gods was stressed in the terms for a priest and priestess of some kind, *goði* and *gyðja*, since they designated men and women who have something to do with a god (Green 1998; Sundqvist 1998). The connection with the divine world is underlined on a rune-stone from the 10th century in Glavendrup on the Danish island of Fyn. The stone was raised to a *goði*, and the inscription ends with the sentence 'May Thor hallow these runes'. The Norse pantheon and the inauguration of sacred areas can also be associated with various men's names. The ending *wiR* means 'he who hallows', and it occurs in several names beginning with God, Freyr, Thor, sanctuary, and people. Other names are connected to men who hallowed land for a *vé* or 'sanctuary', and then were somehow responsible for the sacred precincts. Examples are *Visæti* ('he who sits in the sanctuary') and *Vivaldi* ('he who rules over the sanctuary').

Other terms instead emphasised people who had special skills in speaking, reading, seeing, and transforming things. The term *pulr*, which means 'speaker', designated a man who mastered the oral tradition (Simek 1993; Green 1998; Sundqvist 1998). Through recited mnemonic poems, known as *pulur* (singular *pula*), the speaker performed and passed on religious traditions, myths, and ancient words and poetic phrases. Some scholars (cf. de Vries 1970 I:403) have pointed out place-names like Tullhög and Tulshøj, which suggest that the speaker declaimed the poems standing or sitting on a burial mound (*haugr*), although this idea is disputed. In a few cases we read that the *pulr* also acted as a skald. It has been suggested that a rune-stone from the 9th century at Rök in Östergötland was composed by a *pulr*. The stone has a very long inscription, partly in coded runes, referring to a number of 'family memories' listed one after the other (Widmark 1997). The functions of the *pulr* seem to have corresponded in part to those of the men who are called *erilaR* on runic inscriptions from the 5th and 6th centuries. The word is possibly etymologically related to the medieval term for a ruler, *jarl* (English *earl*), but the Iron Age *eril* was more like a rune master, who knew the art of reading and writing. This art also had ritual sides, since the runes were described as 'deriving from the gods' and one inscription specifically states: 'I *eril* ... hallow ...' (Green 1998).

Visionary ability can chiefly be associated with the form of magic called *seiðr* and the word for a seeress, *völva*, which means literally 'staff-bearer' (Strömbäck 1935; Price 2002; Raudvere 2002; Solli 2002). Several female *völur* (plural) are

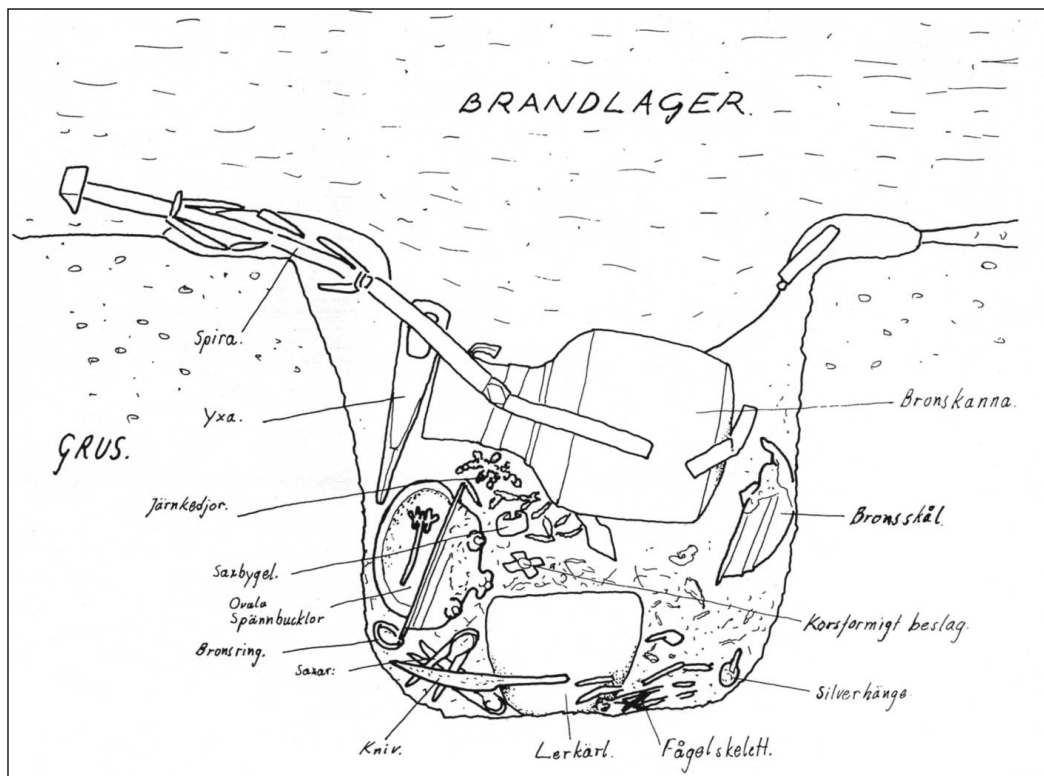


Fig 7 A cremation pit in a burial mound, dated to the first half of the 10th century, at Köpingsvik on Öland, Sweden. The grave was a richly furnished woman's burial, containing objects from the female dress and among other things an axe, a bronze jug possibly from Persia, two copper sheets with runes, and an iron staff. On top of the staff was a miniature house, a 'basket handle' and animal figures (after Beskow Sjöberg 1987: 59, 109). The staff has been interpreted as a *völva* staff (Price 2002: 142 ff.)

mentioned in the Icelandic literature, and the best-known is the one in the Eddic poem *Völuspá*, 'The Seeress's Prophecy' (Fig 7). Roman sources from the first two centuries AD show that even then there were Germanic seeresses who were characterised by a staff or by special knowledge. Among these 'sibyls' Albruna ('the secret knowledge of the elves'), Ganna ('staff'), and Waluburg ('staff-fortress') can be mentioned. It seems that some men could also foretell the future. Some place-names include the otherwise unknown man's name Lytir, which means 'lot-reader' or 'speaker of truth'. And German sources from the 9th century mention both seers and interpreters of dreams in Scandinavia (Sundqvist 1998).

People with special knowledge also include craftsmen, who were called smiths regardless of what their technical speciality was. Craftsmen were in control of more or less secret knowledge and ritual skills, which meant that matter could be transformed into ingenious objects. Through the powers the smiths possessed, they were both desired and feared by other people. Mythological allusions to this

ambiguous relation with craftsmen can be found in *Völundarkviða*, where Völund is described as the best of smiths, although he is chained and mutilated to be unable to flee (Gansum 2004; Barndon 2005). Bearing in mind the craftsmen's knowledge, however, they may also have had special ritual functions. Perhaps ironsmiths, with their knowledge of fire and combustion temperatures, supervised the cremation of the dead, since cremation on the pyre is a difficult technique to master.

Through runic inscriptions, personal names, special terms, and brief accounts in written sources, we can get glimpses of the men and women who possessed special knowledge of 'the old way of life'. Their skills varied to some extent, but what these people had in common was that they seem to have acquired their knowledge by transcending boundaries. Many acquired their knowledge from other tradition bearers, but also through long travels outside their native district. Others tried to obtain hidden knowledge from the world of the dead by sitting on graves. Finds of hemp show that some acquired experience of other worlds through hallucinations. Others expanded their abilities by transgressing the gender conventions of the day, both in their sexuality and in their dress. Roman sources from the 1st century of our era state how 'priests' in certain Germanic tribes wore women's clothes. The same can also be suspected in much later graves with artefacts giving ambiguous signals about the sex of the deceased (Hedeager 1997; Price 2002; Raudvere 2002; Solli 2002).

The boundary-transcending men and women together constituted the bearers of the traditions of *forn siðr*. But no cult leader or religious specialist had sole control over traditions and rites; 'the old way of life' was practised by different people, with partly overlapping knowledge and experience. These men and women with different skills have their parallel in a corresponding diversity of rituals and mythological ideas. Pre-Christian Norse religion was not a uniform body of beliefs and rituals. It consisted of varied and changing traditions. Sometimes the religion is called polytheistic because of the many gods and goddesses. But in view of the different mythological worlds, the different realms of the dead, the many diverse rituals, and the large group of different religious specialists, Old Norse religion should perhaps rather be designated as a multifaceted hybrid.

2. TRACING ORIGINS, CHANGES AND INTERACTION

Two questions concerning Old Norse religion often recur, namely how old was the religion, and what was its origin. Despite the fact that there are many surveys of the Old Norse gods and goddesses, the answers to these two questions are often vague and elusive. There are several reasons for this lack of clarity. Scholars who have studied Old Norse religion are in profound disagreement about how to demarcate it in time and place. Some believe that the religion had its origin in an ancient Indo-European religion, which can also be traced, for example, in the Greek, Iranian, and Indian religions (Dumézil 1973). Many religious expressions would thus be very old, going back to the Bronze Age and perhaps even the Neolithic. Others emphasise that what we know about Scandinavian religion concerns the Viking Age at most, and that a great deal becomes uncertain as soon as we try to go further back in time (Meulengracht Sørensen 1993).

The crucial thing about how to answer questions on the age and origin of Old Norse religion is how this religious tradition is regarded. If it is viewed as a clearly defined and largely unchanging religion, then the question of how old it was and where it came from is justified. But if it is viewed instead as a more fluid and diffuse tradition, then questions of age and origin lose a great deal of their justification. Since it can be described as a multifaceted hybrid, there is a great deal to suggest that the religion should be regarded in the latter way, as diffuse and mutable. This means that we must try to understand the religious tradition and its history in other ways.

Between unity and diversity

In handbooks of Old Norse religion a homogeneous picture of the main divinities, powers and heroes is normally presented. These descriptions are mainly based on the Icelandic literature from the 13th century, and they can be partly confirmed by other sources. Details about the Norsemen and their customs are recorded in Arab and German sources from the 10th and 11th centuries, that is, from a time when many people in Scandinavia had not yet been converted to Christianity. The numerous sacral place-names in present-day Sweden, Norway, and Denmark also underline a common Scandinavian pantheon, with the two families of gods, the *Æsir* and the *Vanir*. Furthermore, some of the divinities can more or less certainly be identified with images on stones and metal objects and three-dimensional figures of bone, antler and precious metal from the period 400–1000. Some rune-stones also mention concepts connected with the pre-Christian ritual and world-view, such as the number nine, the idea of ‘giving good growth’, *Midgard* (‘the world’) and ‘knowledge deriving from the gods’ (de Vries 1970).

Above all, through the many sacral place-names, Old Norse religion appears to be clearly confined to agricultural regions in Scandinavia during the Late Iron Age – from northern Norway to southern Jutland. In the same area there are also contemporary rune-stones, many artefacts with characteristic Scandinavian animal ornamentation, and richly decorated aristocratic boat graves. This uniform picture, however, can be modified in several ways. Some of the gods’ names are known from texts and sacral place-names in Germany, Frisia, and England. The Norse pantheon thus corresponds in part to divinities throughout the Germanic-language area. There are also close similarities to gods known from Sámi, Finnish, Baltic, and Slavic languages, although the names of the gods were different and the languages wholly or partly different from the Scandinavian languages (Ström and Biezais 1975; DuBois 1999; Bertell 2003; Mebius 2003). The Norse god of thunder, Thor, rode in a chariot pulled by he-goats, but so too did the Lithuanian thunder god Perkunas, and like Thor, the Sámi thunder god Hovrengaellis had a hammer as his attribute. When it comes to rituals there were likewise parallels with other areas. Some scholars see a link between the Old Norse form of magic called *seiðr* (Swedish *sejd*) and the circumpolar shamanism, including the Sámi area (Strömbäck 1935; Price 2002; Solli 2002). The outer limits of Scandinavian religion must therefore be perceived as open and diffuse.

Even within the agricultural regions of Scandinavia, major differences in conceptions and rituals can be detected. Variations in sacral place-names show

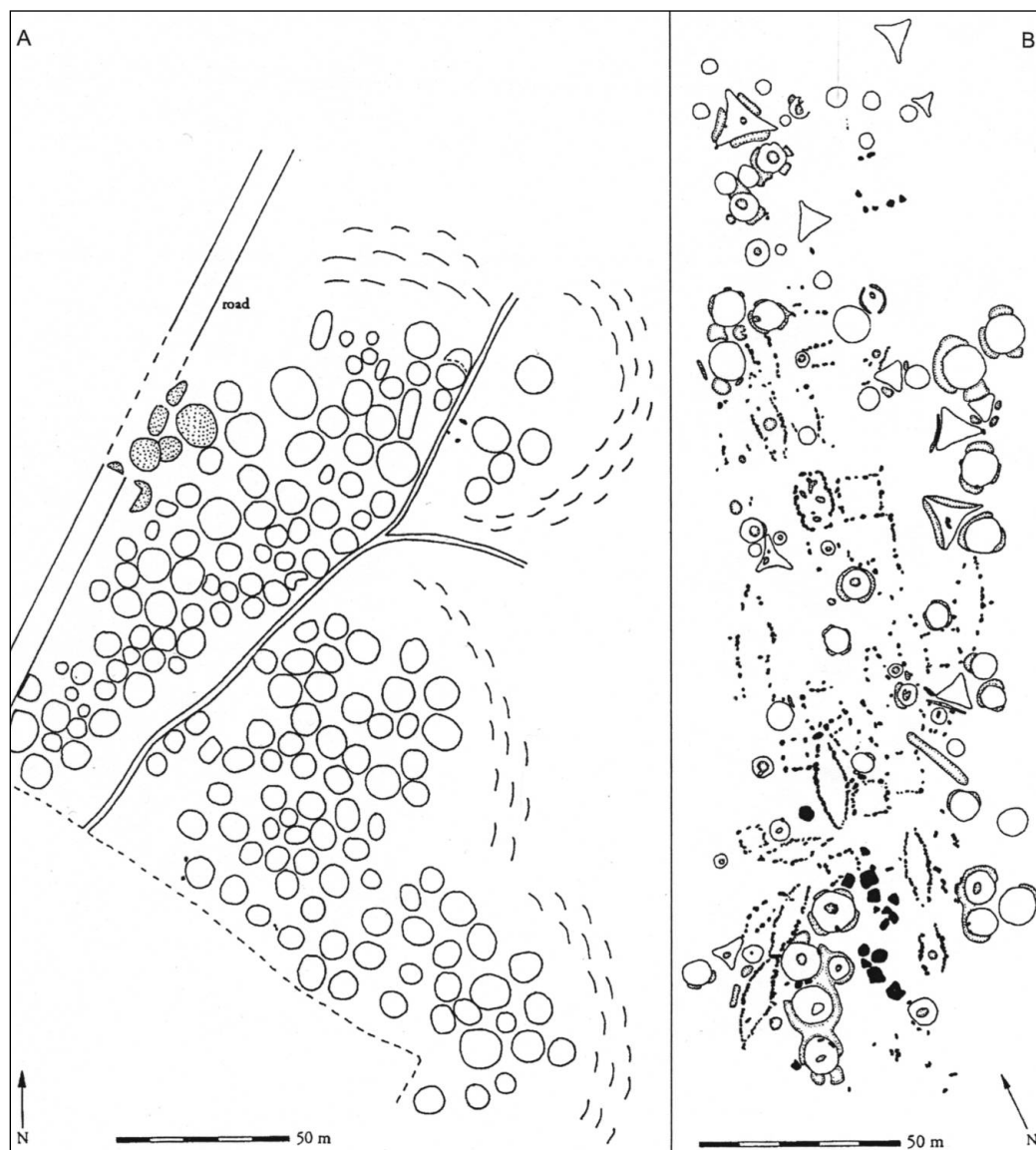


Fig 8 Examples of different burial customs in the Viking Age (AD 800–1000) in southern Scandinavia. A) Burial ground with barrows at Bäck Norregård, Hamneda parish in Finnveden. B) Burial ground with barrows, tricorns and standing stones placed in different geometrical forms at Hjortberga church in Blekinge. Apart from the external layout of the graves, that are shown in the figure, the other parts of the burial custom are also different. The two burial grounds are typical of their regions, and situated only about 120 km from each other (after Svanberg 2003, Figs 78 and 123).

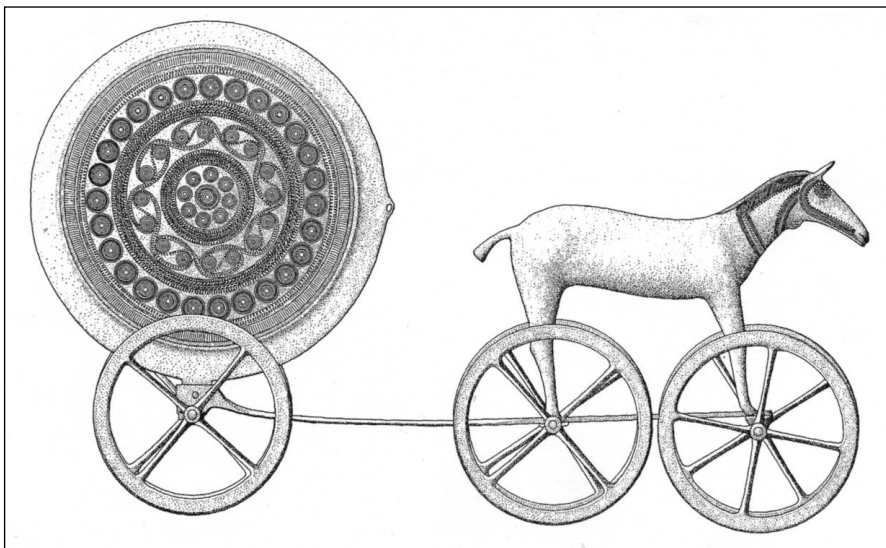


Fig 9 The sun-chariot from Trundholm, on Sjælland in Denmark, dated to the 14th century BC (after Aner and Kersten 1976). The chariot has been interpreted as an image of the sun pulled by a horse. The sun disc is gilded on one side (the 'day side') but not gilded on the other (the 'night side'), which fits with the idea that the sun was pulled from left to right over heaven during the day, and returned from right to left via the underworld during the night.

that the ritual importance of gods and goddesses varied from one area to another. The god Ull, who was associated with the sky, with snow and skis, is known through sacral place-names, above all in central Sweden and Norway, while his name is totally lacking in place-names in Denmark and Skåne. Even the important fertility god Freyr is lacking in sacral place-names in southern Scandinavia (de Vries 1970). Above all ritual diversity within Scandinavia can also be traced through graves. Differences in the handling of the dead, in the construction of the grave and in the selection of objects and animals that accompanied the deceased into the grave reveal distinct regional ritual traditions (Ringtved 1988; Burström 1991; Svanberg 2003). In some regions inhumations without visible markers dominate, in other areas mounds with cremations, and in still other districts stone settings with cremations (Fig 8). In a recent study of southern Scandinavia (Svanberg 2003) the regional burial customs are estimated to account for 90–95% of all graves, leaving only a thin strain of pan-Scandinavian burials such as the boat graves (Müller-Wille 1970). Since Old Norse religion was defined as a 'way of life', the diversity of rituals means that it cannot be perceived as a uniform and homogeneous religion. Instead the religion must be regarded as a series of partly overlapping traditions, differing from place to place and from time to time, and also between different age groups, sexes, and social groups. Perhaps the shared Scandinavian features, such as boat graves and sacral place-names, should primarily be viewed as the religious expressions confined to an aristocracy with wide-ranging connections all over Scandinavia.

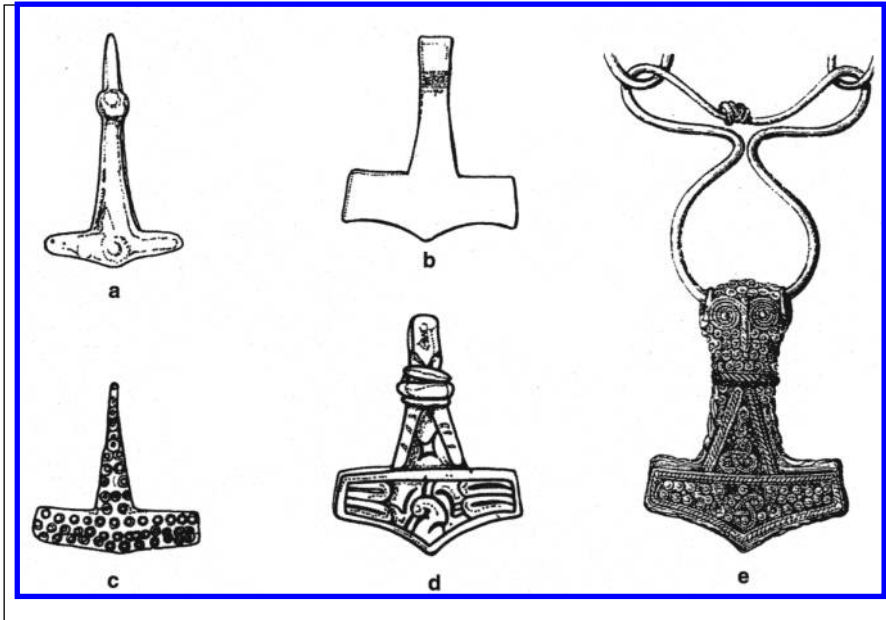


Fig 10 Different types of pendants interpreted as Thor's hammers. They have been dated to the 9th–11th centuries AD (after Staecker 1999b:92).

A question of time

When Icelandic writers wrote their texts in the 13th century, they must have taken the elements and motifs in the stories as coherent and contemporary. But a scrutiny of individual motifs shows that they varied considerably in age. At the start of the 13th century Snorri Sturluson in his creation narrative *Gylfaginning* describes how the sun is drawn across the sky by the horses Arvakr and Alsvidr (Simek 1993). Pictures and artefacts from the Bronze Age show that this figure of thought was very old, and the idea is attested as far back in time as the famous sun-chariot from the 14th century BC, found in the Trundholm bog in northern Sjælland at the start of the 20th century (Fig 9). It consists of a six-wheeled chariot on which is placed a gilded solar disc of bronze pulled by a bronze horse. A similar find has been made at Tågaborg near Helsingborg in Skåne. In addition, there are pictures of solar discs drawn by horses on razors and rock carvings from the Bronze Age. The many pictures show that the sun had a much more central position in the conceptual world and rituals of the Bronze Age than in Iron Age religion (Kaul 1998; 2004). Despite this, the figure of thought lived on after 2,600 years, although by the 13th century it had been reduced to a detail in Snorri's creation narrative.

A motif which was much later than the horse-drawn sun was Thor's hammer Mjölnir. It plays a central role in the stories of Thor and his battles with the giants. Thor's hammers are also well known as amulets of iron, bronze, and silver, which people wore round the neck. But the oldest Thor's hammers only date from the start of the 9th century, which means that, from the first artefacts to the Icelandic texts, the motif can only be followed for 400 years (Fig 10). The use of Thor's

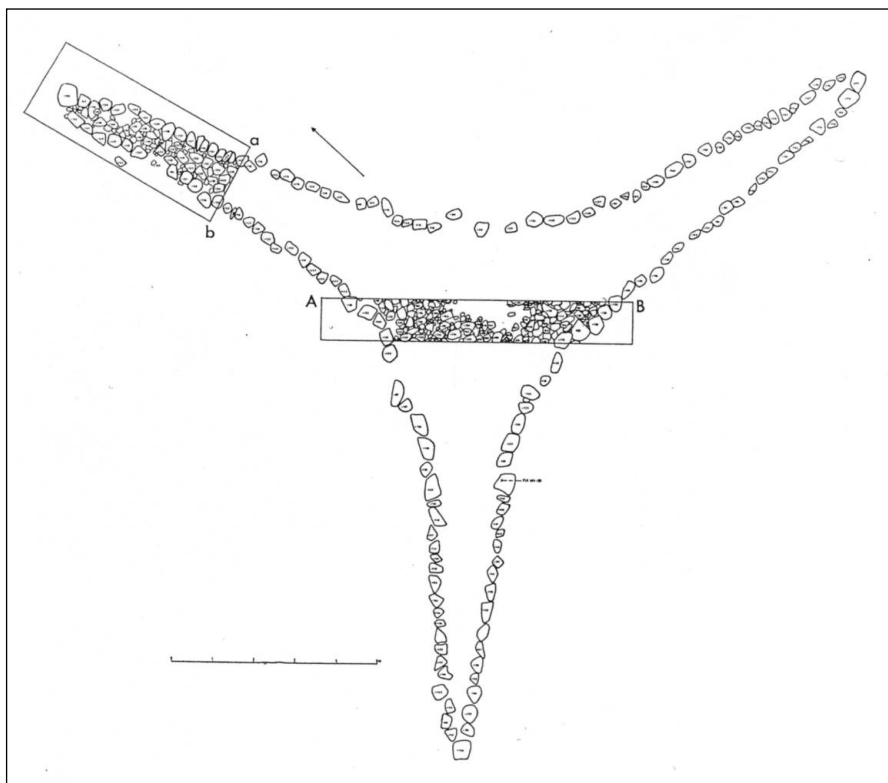


Fig 11 A three-pointed stone-setting ('tricorn') at Bjärsgård in Skåne, Sweden (after Strömberg 1963, Fig 7).

hammer should probably be viewed as a reaction to the Christian cross. When Christianity became visible in earnest in Scandinavia through the Christian mission in the 9th century, the indigenous *forn siðr* stood out more clearly as a separate religious tradition. In this cultural encounter, Thor's hammer seems to have been created as a new symbol for 'the old way of life' (Staecker 1999).

A third figure of thought with its own complicated history is the idea of the world-tree Yggdrasill, with its three roots, standing in the middle of the world surrounded by nine different worlds. The narratives of the world-tree concerned fundamental questions about the creation and structure of the world. The tree stood at the centre of the world, surrounded by the beings and powers that inhabited the earth, but through its trunk it also connected heaven, earth, and the underworld. Concepts such as time and place, destiny and death were thereby linked to the idea of the world-tree. Depictions of this complex idea can be detected in single images as well as in the design of a grave type from the Iron Age (Andrén 2004). The world-tree, with its three roots, seems to have been rendered in three-pointed stone-settings ('tricorns'). At the middle of these tricorns there is often a central stone which marked the trunk of the tree, while the three points denoted the three roots. The tricorns can be dated from about AD 200 until the 10th

century (Fig 11). The world tree can thus be detected in material expressions at least 1,000 years before the Icelandic texts

These examples show that motifs and elements in the Icelandic literature had a highly varied historical background. When they were committed to writing in Iceland at the start of the 13th century they could be 2,600, 1,000, or 400 years old. The figures of thought thus belonged to different contexts in different phases, which means that the meaning of the motifs must have changed over time. The examples thus show that the religious tradition indirectly presented in the Icelandic literature was not a uniform and coherent tradition with a common origin. Instead, the religion must be perceived as having been composed of widely differing ritual and mythological elements, of different historical background and origin.

A cultural patchwork

The best point of departure for trying to understand Old Norse religion and its complex history is to proceed from the anthropological perspective that no culture is a confined and unchanging unit of its own (Spivak 1987; Young 1990; Bhabha 1994). All culture consists of a patchwork of different elements with varying history and background. This is especially true of oral cultures, where practice and words are the sources of all tradition (Ong 1982; Goody 1986). The nature of oral culture means that local and regional variations always exist, thereby creating internal sources for changes over time. Besides different foreign elements can successively be incorporated into local cultures. Yet it is not a matter of passive borrowings, but of active choices and reinterpretations of foreign models. These active choices must be viewed as stages in different strategies, where different social groups negotiated with each other by acquiring alien cultural expressions in various ways. The local reinterpretations thus meant that partly new cultural expressions were created – as mixed forms or hybrids.

Old Norse religion was an oral culture, based on practice and words. The Edda poems as well as the skaldic poems reflect this varied oral culture, since the mythological notices in these texts are often inconsistent and contradictory. This hybrid character of the Scandinavian religious tradition is even more clear if we move beyond the Icelandic texts.

Similarities between the religious traditions in Northern Europe hint at recurrent incorporations in cultural encounters between Scandinavian, Sámi, Finnish, Baltic, and Slavic religion (Ström and Biezais 1975; DuBois 1999; Price 2002; Bertell 2003). But contacts with continental Europe and the Mediterranean area were also crucial for changes in the Norse religious tradition. Scandinavia had distinct links with these areas as far back as the Bronze Age, and the central role of the sun at that time may very well have been inspired by similar ideas in the eastern Mediterranean area (Kaul 2004; Kristiansen and Larsson 2005). During the last few centuries BC, continental Europe was dominated by Celtic kingdoms with large fortified cities. In the Celtic area there were special rectangular enclosures for large ritual meals, and one such structure has recently been found at Kärragård in southern Halland (Carlie 1999). The find shows that the Celtic world must also have influenced Scandinavia and its religion at the time.

Otherwise it is chiefly the Roman Empire that served as the great model for many of the features in Scandinavian religion which are known through the Icelandic literature. Through the Roman conquest of the Celtic kingdoms in continental Europe around the start of our era, a world empire suddenly appeared very close to Scandinavia.

Proximity to the Roman Empire is noticed in Roman objects which began to appear in Scandinavia in the 1st century AD. But direct contacts between southern Scandinavia and the Empire do not seem to have been established until after the Marcomannic wars of the 160s and 170s (Fagerlie 1967; Lind 1981, 1988; Lund Hansen 1987). Roman merchants and diplomats probably travelled in southern Scandinavia in the 3rd and 4th centuries, while Scandinavians began to enlist in the Roman army. These cultural encounters and experiences had the result that many Roman models were incorporated and reinterpreted in the local cultures of southern Scandinavia, even though the area was outside the *limes* or frontier of the Empire (Andrén 1998b; Jørgensen *et al.* 2003; Fischer 2005). A particularly obvious example of these Roman hybrid forms in Scandinavia is runic writing. The runes were modelled on the Latin alphabet in southern Scandinavia in the late 2nd century or around 200. Most of the runes have the same basic shape and sound value as the Latin originals, but new ones were also invented. Unlike the Latin letters, each rune not only had a phonetic value but also denoted a concept. The runes were arranged in a different order from the Latin alphabet and they were used in a completely different way. The person who created the runes had thereby made a Roman-Scandinavian hybrid (Odenstedt 1990; Williams 1997; Fischer 2005).

In certain contexts the runes can be linked to Scandinavian skaldic poetry and Scandinavian animal ornamentation, which was a special decorative style with more or less explicitly rendered animals interwoven in each other. The models for both these forms of expression should probably also be sought in the Roman Empire as well. The animal ornamentation, which can be traced from the 4th and 5th centuries, seems to have been created from ornamentation and animal images associated above all with the Roman armies in the provinces of the Empire (Werner 1966). In the same way, some scholars have suggested that Scandinavian skaldic art, with its complex metaphors and metres, may have been created on the model of contemporary praise poems in Latin (Sävborg 2006).

Similar local reinterpretations of Roman models can also be detected in other parts of Scandinavian culture, for example in the ring-fort of Ismantorp on Öland (Fig 12) that was built around 200 AD (Andrén 2006). In the middle of the fort was a large wooden pole, symbolising the world-tree or world-axe at the centre of the world. The fort itself consisted of about 95 houses for animals and humans and a tall ring-wall with nine gates. These gates can be viewed as symbolic openings to the nine worlds surrounding the world – or ‘Midgard’, which is sometimes described as a castle whose walls were built of the eyelashes of the primeval giant Ymir. At Ismantorp, the military order was inscribed in the cosmological layout of the fortress. This combination of war and world-view has clear Roman models. The Roman legionary fortresses were laid out according to the Roman idea of heaven divided into four parts. The fortresses were built around two crossing axis, and in some cases a foundation pit, representing the entrance to the under-world,

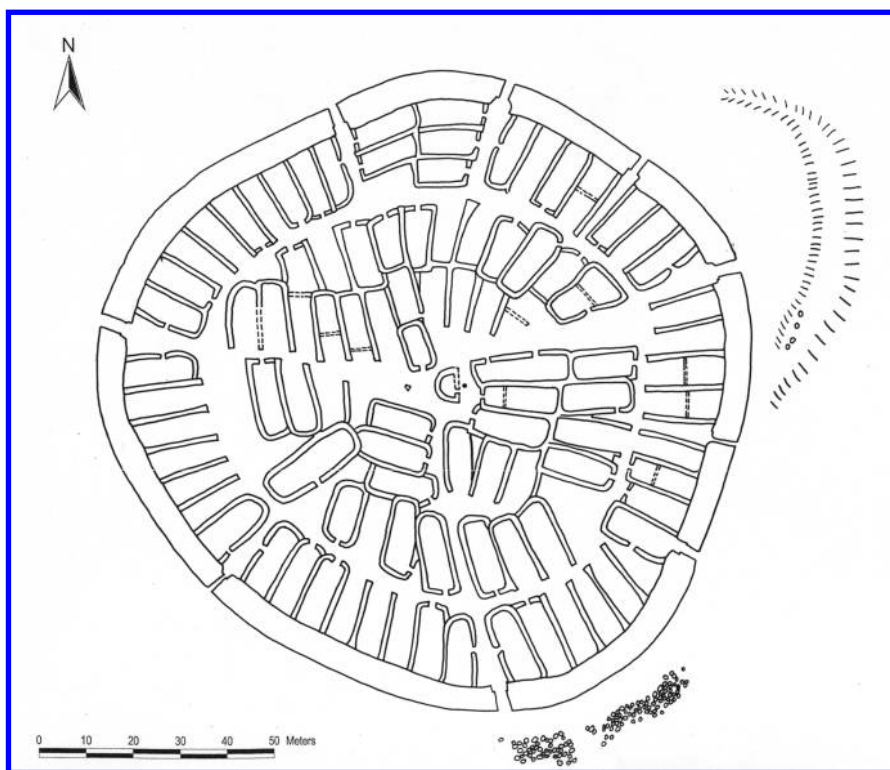


Fig 12 Plan of the ring-fort at Ismantorp on Öland, Sweden. The ring-fort was used temporarily 200–650 AD. The plan is based on digitised air photos.

has been found in the centre. Cosmologies need not necessarily correspond to systematic and well-ordered figures of thought, but general ideas about the world can become a clearly structured universe in special circumstances. I believe that this is what happened at Ismantorp. In the encounter with Roman culture and its distinct world-view, Old Norse cosmology became more explicit and more systematic than before.

In the same way, the characteristics of gods and the representations of divine powers changed as a result of Roman interaction. The god Odin was an old divinity, since he is mentioned indirectly in AD 98 by the Roman historian Tacitus. But Odin had a highly composite character, and therefore scholars have debated whether Roman models may have been incorporated in the cult of Odin, for a long time (Kaliff and Sundqvist 2004). Some believe that the Roman imperial cult was the source of the idea of Odin as ruler of the other gods, while other scholars point to the cult of Mithras as a model for Odin's more ecstatic and enigmatic sides. The foreign influences mean that the figure of Odin and the narratives about him start to resemble the stories about him in Icelandic literature. Odin is recognised by his horse, his spear, and his two ravens, and all these attributes can be traced in pictures from the 5th and 6th centuries. Images of other gods such as Tyr (Fig 13) and Balder can be identified from this time too, which shows that the mythological



Fig 13 A gold bracteate from Trollhättan, in Västergötland, Sweden. The image has been interpreted as the god Tyr putting his hand in the mouth of the wolf Fenrir. The bracteate is dated to the 5th or early 6th centuries AD (after Axboe *et al.* 1985–89, nr 190).

narratives known from later times had begun to take shape in the 5th and 6th centuries (Axboe *et al.* 1985–89). The very way of depicting the Norse pantheon was also clearly inspired by the Roman pictorial world. The models were bronze statuettes of Roman divinities and images of them on coins and medals, which were introduced to Scandinavia from the 2nd to the 6th century (Lund Hansen 1987; Serra 1996).

Central rituals were likewise modified in the encounter with the Roman Empire. The traditional places for large-scale rites in Scandinavia were wetlands, bogs, and lakes. Deposits in wet environments can be traced back at least as far as the Neolithic, around 4500 BC, and lasted until the Viking Age, around AD 1100 (Stjernquist 1997; Fabech 1993; Kaul 2003). Polished flint axes, pots, tools, bronze objects, weapons, animals, and, occasionally, human beings were deposited at different times in lakes and bogs. The pattern for these deposits varied from time to time and from place to place, which means that the rites and their meanings must have varied. The tradition of large deposits in wetlands ended in a crescendo with huge weapon sacrifices in shallow lakes in southern Scandinavia AD 150–450. At thirty or so places weapons from defeated armies were ritually destroyed and thrown into lakes, sometimes on several different occasions at the same place (Fabech 1991; Jørgensen *et al.* 2003). A well-excavated example is Illerup Ådal in central Jutland, where an estimated 10,000 weapons were deposited on just one occasion around AD 200 (Ilkjær 2000). The tradition of

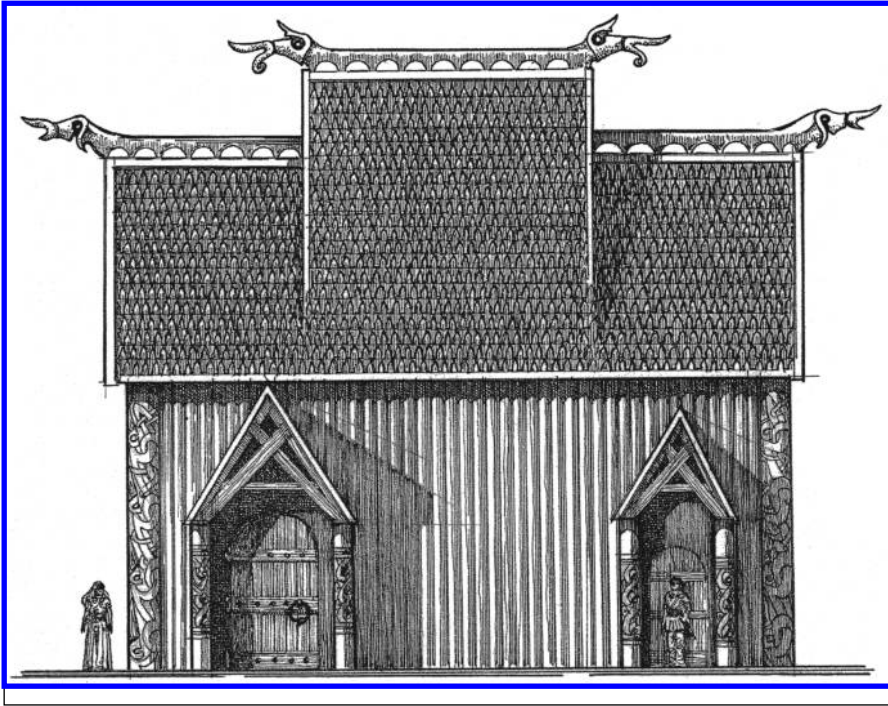


Fig 14 Reconstruction of the ceremonial house at Uppåkra in Skåne, Sweden (after Larsson 2004 Fig 22).

weapon sacrifices can be detected on a smaller scale before this, in the Late Bronze Age and at the start of the Iron Age, but the large-scale weapon sacrifices were clearly inspired by the contemporary Roman triumphs, where weapons from vanquished armies were displayed in the same way and deposited in sanctuaries.

After about 450, when the tradition of weapon sacrifices ceased, deposits in wetlands continued, but became much more sporadic. In contrast, a completely new ritual place arose, the cult house. The oldest example of a ritual building known hitherto is a cult house in Uppåkra (Fig 14), built in one of the first centuries AD and used until about 800 (Larsson 2004). Other cult houses and halls with traces of major rites are now known from much of Scandinavia from the period 500–1000 (Nielsen 1997; Jørgensen 2002). The cult houses marked an important transition from outdoor rites in wetlands at some distance from human settlement, to rites performed indoors at the centre of the settlement. With the cult houses and new rites performed for the gods, new narratives about the divinities were probably developed as well, which may explain why it is from this time that images of gods can first be identified through later known attributes.

The change in the spatial location of the rituals has clear Roman models as well (White 1990). Greek and Roman temples were not cult buildings but were constructed to house temple treasures and images of gods. The rituals instead took place at the large altars east of the temples. That was where sacrificial animals were slaughtered, the meat was distributed among the participants, and selected

parts of the animals were burnt on the altars. These outdoor rites may explain why the classical temples were primarily decorated on the outside, an example being the sculptures on the Parthenon in Athens. Unlike Greek and Roman religion, however, several Oriental religions in the Roman Empire were focused on rituals indoors. In Judaism the synagogue was the scene of rituals, in the Mithras cult the secret initiations took place in a *mithraeum*, and in Christianity the mass and eucharist took place in a church. Through these religions, indoor rites became of increasing importance in the Roman Empire in the 2nd and 3rd centuries. Since Christianity received the active support of the Emperor at the start of the 4th century, and became the only permitted religion at the start of the 5th century, the large-scale rites in the Roman Empire changed radically. The major rituals were no longer performed outdoors but indoors in the large new Christian basilicas. These indoor rites may explain the simple exteriors of the early churches and their lavish interiors, with marble and dazzling mosaics.

In a Scandinavian perspective it is very interesting that this fundamental change in the location of the major rites in the Roman Empire has a corresponding change at the same time, with the early cult house in Uppåkra. This and other ritual buildings can thus be regarded as echoes of the early Christian churches. Roman – and early Christian – models were used to create something new in Scandinavia. The Scandinavian cult houses were not churches, but they were imitations of a Christian phenomenon, which means that Scandinavian religion was influenced by Christianity long before the missionary era and the official conversion.

These early Christian influences mean that our view of Christianisation needs to be modified. The conversion of Scandinavia can no longer be perceived as ‘the first Europeanisation’, as has happened so often. Christianisation must instead be seen as one of several transformations, with foreign models, although Christianisation in the long term was more thoroughgoing than any of the earlier changes. Christian elements and motifs were incorporated and reinterpreted locally as early as the 4th and 5th centuries. In the missionary period, the 9th and 10th centuries, Christian influences continued, while a ‘pagan reaction’ can be suspected behind a symbol like Thor’s hammer. In the latter part of the 10th century and the 11th century, Scandinavia was converted to Christianity (Nilsson 1996; Müller-Wille 1997; Gräslund 2001), while indigenous forms of expression such as animal ornamentation were simultaneously used in Christian contexts (Andrén 2000). But when the church was established with its own diocesan organisation and with a continental European or ‘Romanesque’ style in the 12th century, the stories of the Old Norse gods and heroes still lived on. Historians like Saxo Grammaticus in Denmark and Snorri Sturluson in Iceland both tried at the start of the 13th century to combine pre-Christian and Christian traditions in different ways, so that Scandinavia, despite its pagan background, could be integrated into a general European Christian history. In view of the fact that Christian influences can be traced far back in the Scandinavian religious tradition, it is difficult to determine which parts of these medieval texts can be apprehended as Christian interpretations of an imagined pagan past and which were expressions of Christian elements incorporated in Late Iron Age religion. In either case, the authors of the 13th century created new hybrid forms, which in their own way were merely a continuation of the hybrids that had been created earlier.

ROMAN HYBRIDS

There are thus no easy answers to the question of the age and origin of Scandinavian religion. Certain elements were very old, and can be traced back at least to the Early Bronze Age (1700–1100 BC), while other aspects were so young that they were contemporary with the early Christian mission in the 9th century AD. Both rituals and ideas changed over time, as a result of encounters and exchanges with other cultures. Influences from the Roman Empire in particular were crucial for the character of Scandinavian religion, as it emerges in actual traces from the Late Iron Age and as Christian echoes in the Icelandic literature.

The old idea that Norse religion somehow represents an archaic and unchanging tradition on the periphery of Europe can thus no longer be maintained. Instead there was a changing religious tradition, which constantly incorporated and reinterpreted foreign models in the tradition, so that it gradually underwent a radical change. These conclusions also give a new perspective on the way in which Old Norse religion has been perceived and interpreted subsequently (Allzén 1990; Roesdahl and Meulengracht Sørensen 1996; Raudvere *et al.* 2005). Until the Romantic Movement in the 19th century the Norse gods were portrayed like the classical gods in Greece and the Roman Empire, in a way that arouses surprising associations with today's perceptions of the significance of Roman contacts in the Early Iron Age. In contrast, the romanticism and nationalism of the 19th and 20th centuries, with the heavy emphasis on the unchanging distinctive character of Scandinavia, have very little in common with today's research. There never was an archaic and unchanging Scandinavian religion, indeed the Roman influences were so crucial that one could say that the famous Scandinavian Viking Age and its pre-Christian religion would have been inconceivable without the Roman Empire.

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